

AMERICAN WAY



JULY 2015

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EDITOR'S NOTE

By Adam Pitluk



MIAMI MUSINGS

FOR A FEW HOURS A DAY OVER the course of a few months, I felt tough as nails. The crew I was running with was composed of some of the baddest dudes in Miami, which thereby put them high in the running for baddest dudes on the planet.

There was Miami local Herman Caicedo, a martial artist and shoot fighter. Jessie Robinson started out as a boxing trainer at the famous Kronk Gym in Detroit before relocating to South Florida, first as one of Don King's guys. Later, he'd team up with Herman. There was Andre "Tombstone" Purlette, the WBO Heavyweight Boxing Champion who moved to Hollywood, Florida, from his native Guyana. Back then, there was all kinds of talk in boxing circles that he was in line to fight Lennox Lewis for the unified heavyweight championship. And then there was the baddest dude of them all, former heavyweight champion Shannon "The Cannon" Briggs, who recently moved to Miami from Brooklyn, New York, to train with these guys in the Warriors Boxing Gym. I was a reporter doing a story on the gym, on Andre's meteoric rise in the division, and on Shannon's Ali-like return to the ring.

When we walked down the streets of Miami, people noticed. Sometimes they came up to Briggs and asked for an autograph. Most of the time, they pretended we weren't there as they slowly got out of our way, trying not to look scared. I noticed because were I not with them, I'd be scared. But I was with them. So I

made direct eye contact with everyone who was tougher than me and smiled a cat-got-the-canary smile. It didn't matter that I had never been in a boxing ring, nor that the last time I threw a punch in anger was five years earlier during a frat football game against the Phi Deltas. I told Andre that story. He rolled his eyes at me. "You fraternity guys are silly," he quipped.

My two best friends enjoyed visiting me at the gym. There was Candice, a Miami local who was a boxing fan, but I'm pretty sure she really came down to watch Ismael Kone train. He was a light heavyweight on the 1996 Swedish Olympic team. When he moved to Miami, Candice tried hard to be his tour guide. Then one day Herman was talking to me while Candice was within earshot. "He's exceptional," Herman declared, pointing at Andre, who was lifting 80 pounds with his neck. "He's above-average," he then said, pointing at Ismael. Candice laughed out loud.

My other best friend was a guy we all called Miami Dan. Miami Dan was from Kansas City. He earned his nickname because when he moved to South Florida, he began dressing in all linens, assuming that his breathable attire would help him fit in with the locals. But Miami Dan was a very hairy, very sweaty guy, and in the subtropical Miami weather, he'd sweat through his threads and they'd become see-through.

One night, Candice, Miami Dan and I

were at a bar called Legends. As biology goes, Miami Dan and I went into the bathroom at the same time. We'd been talking boxing at the bar, and when we entered the lavatory, for some odd reason, we thought it'd be a good idea to box. Miami Dan was bigger than me, stronger than me, better looking than me, furrrier than me, and unlike me, he'd boxed before. It was, in boxing parlance, even matchmaking.

We started to fight and I was holding my own until a big, burly Russian entered the bathroom and grabbed us both

by the scruff. His vice-like grip instantly put Miami Dan and me in excruciating pain. Then the behemoth spoke:

"You fight, yes? OK. But be friends."

With that, he loosened his grip and leaned against the sink. He nodded for us to recommence, and then he stood there and watched us brawl. I tried to mimic what I saw Andre Purlette and Shannon Briggs doing in the gym. (Not so much Ismael, though.) Miami Dan employed his John L. Sullivan-like stance and tattooed me with jabs. I flailed away like a windmill. We both knew that the seventh rule of Fight Club was that, "Fights will go on as long as they have to." It seemed like a good time to quit was when he landed a shot flush to my liver while I simultaneously landed one to his kneecap. The Russian was amused. When we came out of the bathroom all disheveled and

WHEN WE WALKED DOWN THE STREETS OF MIAMI, PEOPLE NOTICED.

Dec. 15, 1995: Shannon Briggs throws a punch at Calvin Jones during a fight. Briggs won the fight with a first-round knockout.



out of breath, Candice naturally asked what happened. We told her. “Oh,” she said. She wasn’t surprised.

Midway through the summer, my buddy Jeff came to visit from Dallas. He was supposed to stay for a week. Three weeks later, my roommate, Timmy, asked if Jeff was ever going to leave.

“Of course he will,” I replied.

“When?” Timmy asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“Why don’t you?”

“He’s your friend.”

“He’s been here three weeks,” I said. “I’m pretty sure he’s your friend by now.”

Timmy didn’t like that answer. He was a banker or a mortgage broker or something by day, and by night, he was a weight lifter. Timmy was a varsity swimmer at the University of Wisconsin two years earlier. He, too, was bigger and more athletic than me. So after this exchange, he wrestled me to the ground and refused to let me up until I either kicked Jeff out or admitted that Patrick Swayze had the most chiseled cheekbones in Hollywood. Jeff left a few days later, but not before taking a midnight dip in our apartment complex’s community pool while screaming Bell Biv DeVoe songs.

That year, I also met Lenore, who was from the Alabama/Florida line, and she was married to a roughneck named Nate. He was a journeyman electrician, so he was always traveling. On one of his home stints, he offered me a beat-up old Jet Ski that didn’t work. But it did have a sticker of the Tasmanian Devil

drinking a beer, so I accepted it. I knew nothing about engines, but my friend, Bob, did. He was from Minneapolis and moved his family to the Miami suburbs because of the booming economy and plentiful jobs. Bob opened the hood and saw that rats chewed through almost every electrical component. Then he did a title check on it and revealed it was stolen. I hauled it to the police station, unhitched it, and drove off. That one would be too hard to explain.

All of this happened more than 14 years ago. It wasn’t until I read Drew Linsky’s story about Miami (page 70) that I considered where all my friends were from. Almost none of them grew up in South Florida, but we all called it home. Drew begins his story by saying, “Miami is becoming a true city of the future.” I shared that sentiment back then also, but it’s personified these days, as you’ll see by his story.

Those were different times, ones I reflect on lovingly. I’m not nearly as tough anymore. And my nights aren’t nearly as interesting. Maybe that’s because I left Miami. Or maybe it’s because the lessons learned in Miami scared me off to the Dallas suburbs. In any event, there’s no moral to this story. These are just some of my fonder Miami musings.

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